UB Law Forum

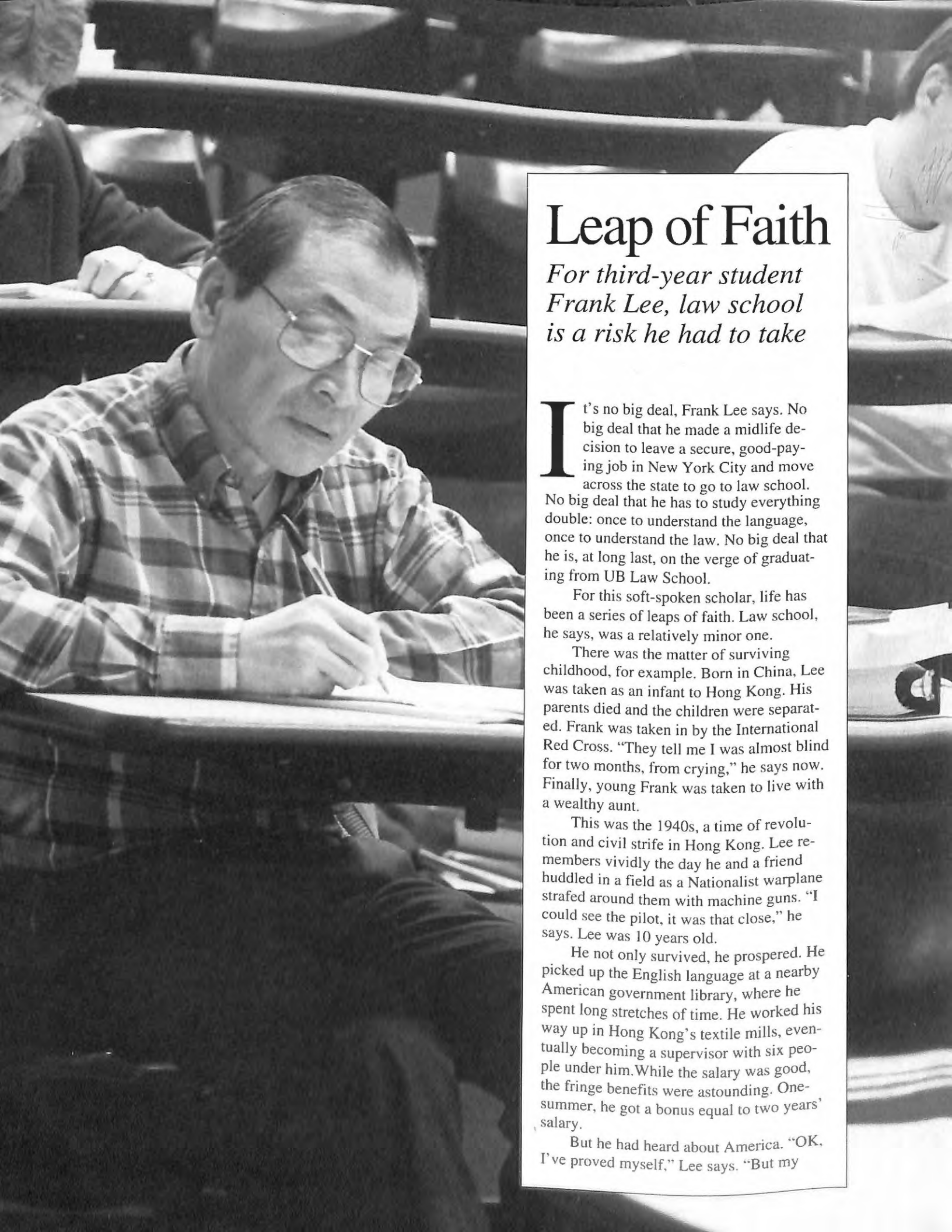
Volume 6
Number 2 *Spring/Summer 1992*

Article 7

4-1-1992

Leap of Faith: For Third-Year Student Frank Lee, Law School is a Risk He Had to Take

UB Law Forum



Leap of Faith

For third-year student Frank Lee, law school is a risk he had to take

It's no big deal, Frank Lee says. No big deal that he made a midlife decision to leave a secure, good-paying job in New York City and move across the state to go to law school. No big deal that he has to study everything double: once to understand the language, once to understand the law. No big deal that he is, at long last, on the verge of graduating from UB Law School.

For this soft-spoken scholar, life has been a series of leaps of faith. Law school, he says, was a relatively minor one.

There was the matter of surviving childhood, for example. Born in China, Lee was taken as an infant to Hong Kong. His parents died and the children were separated. Frank was taken in by the International Red Cross. "They tell me I was almost blind for two months, from crying," he says now. Finally, young Frank was taken to live with a wealthy aunt.

This was the 1940s, a time of revolution and civil strife in Hong Kong. Lee remembers vividly the day he and a friend huddled in a field as a Nationalist warplane strafed around them with machine guns. "I could see the pilot, it was that close," he says. Lee was 10 years old.

He not only survived, he prospered. He picked up the English language at a nearby American government library, where he spent long stretches of time. He worked his way up in Hong Kong's textile mills, eventually becoming a supervisor with six people under him. While the salary was good, the fringe benefits were astounding. One summer, he got a bonus equal to two years' salary.

But he had heard about America. "OK, I've proved myself," Lee says. "But my

friends say to me, 'You know, in America, if you've got it, the sky's the limit.'"

That was all the challenge he needed. In 1963, with his wife, Kee, and their infant daughter, Joan, he packed his bags —including six pairs of custom-made work pants — and headed for NewYork.

Those pants came in handy. Despite his experience and knowledge, he couldn't find a textiles job in the big city. So he had to start all over again, working in the sewers for the giant electric utility Consolidated Edison.

The blue Con Ed hard hat on the dresser of his dormitory room is a reminder of how that job became a second career. Attending the City University of New York at night, Lee learned electrical engineering and electronics technology. By day, he traveled Staten Island, checking relays and troubleshooting problems as a senior electrician. He became a union steward, too. One issue he took up was a payback to the Red Cross, persuading the company to give employees a half-day off with pay to donate blood.

His was a good career, but after 15 years, it became apparent that he had risen as far as he was going to. His family situation changed, also. His daughters were off to school, and his wife, Kee, passed away after a long struggle with cancer. (Joan Lee is married and a practicing veterinarian in New Jersey. Her younger sister, Jean Lee, is a Massachusetts Institute of Technology graduate now pursuing a Ph.D. in materials science at Cornell University).

After a CUNY class one day, a supportive professor broached the idea of law school. He was interested, so she brought him a stack of pamphlets and other information. He took the LSAT — and did poorly, largely because of difficulty with the language. So he took it again, with better results.

"I have to do it, or I don't survive."

Lee's first plan — to matriculate at night, even as far away as Philadelphia — fell through when Con Ed wouldn't let him work a shorter week. He had a decision to make.

"I figure, if I do want to go to law school and change my life from there, why not go full time?" Lee says. "I was still hanging onto that money from Con Ed. But it seemed a little bit greedy. You've got to give up something."

So he applied to UB Law School. The low tuition was attractive, considering that he no longer would have an income and would have to borrow to pay for school. He was accepted for admission. And once more, he set out to redefine his life.

"He's always been a survivor," says Angela Gott, a fellow third-year law student and a friend of Lee's. "He's seen all the crime and the corruption and the graft in New York, and he basically doesn't buy into any of it. He's motivated by human nature, not money."

Lee says writing is the skill in which he is weakest. He has gotten substantial help in developing his writing from the Law School faculty — especially, before his death in January, from Associate Professor Muhammad I. Kenyatta.

"Over the past year I've seen him move from being kind of a shy guy at the margins to being right there at the center," Kenyatta said late last year. "He brings a unique perspective to the classroom discussion, both because he's older and because he has firsthand knowledge of other systems of government and other systems of law."

Kenyatta said he found Lee's perspectives on the American civil rights movement — a major interest of the professor — especially valuable, given that the typical law student is too young to have lived through the movement's heyday in the 1960s.

"He's old enough to remember things. He can talk about things that to most of our students are just dim memories, or not even memories at all."

Kenyatta said Lee is "one of the students who keeps the pressure on us, the faculty and the administration, to keep our promise that we want to have a culturally diverse community. And we need that kind of pressure."

After graduation and the bar exam, Lee is looking toward a career in public-interest law. "My main idea is, I want to work with older people and people who don't understand much English," he says. He cites Medicare and Social Security as areas in which he could make a difference for such clients. "As long as I can get enough money to pay off my loan."

And of this newest stretch of his life's journey, he says: "I wouldn't say this is tremendous courage or anything. I have to do it, or I don't survive." ■